Desire lines, Detroit and walking from one thing to another

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Desire lines, what a beautiful concept. Saying the words conjures up a multitude of images and feelings - bodies, flow, fluidity, lust, geometries, tracing...almost infinite possibilities of imaginings. For me desire lines also signify deviations and interruptions - from the constrictions of the urban planning grid, and from psychological pressures of time and conformity: making paths where we want to go, literally and metaphorically, making our own way, in our own time. However, for others and, as this article will demonstrate, specifically in Detroit, these paths are born out of necessity and a lack of municipal infrastructure for large swathes of the population.

This article discusses the phenomenon of desire lines in Detroit as networks of survival and opportunities across the city; how these improvised signs of everyday life reflect the personal and political histories of neighbourhoods, places and times and how these paths shift, change and are changed over time, reflecting the shifts in economics, demographics and politics. It also discusses how these paths led our company, Walk & Squawk, to the development of a three-year community cultural exchange - the Walking Project, between people in Southeastern Michigan and KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and to a shift and transformation of our performance practices.

Detroit 1999

In September 1999 I moved to Detroit, the Motor City, from the leafy college town of Ann Arbor, Michigan in the United States where I had been living since 1992. I decided to explore as much of the city as possible before winter set in.

Attempting to cross a six-lane highway in mid-town made me realise that walking was not going to be easy and I was impatient. I decided to cycle in spite (or perhaps because) of the many raised eyebrows and plain incomprehension of American friends and acquaintances. Detroit had once been the murder capital of the States, it was supposedly dangerous to wander around the inner city, let alone be without the protection of metal bodywork and electronically-controlled windows. Although I was loth to admit it, cycling in Detroit wasn't the easy option it appeared to be: drivers were clearly unused to seeing anything on the road that wasn't on four wheels: they swerved in horror to see an un-motorised two-wheeled entity beside them, honking their horns, rolling down their windows and swearing at me.

So more for my safety than anything else I took to the sidewalks and it began to dawn on me why there were so few pedestrians: walking distances between stores, school, church, offices and homes were huge, and where pavements existed, many were cracked, badly pot-holed, overgrown with grass and, surprisingly, suddenly ended for no apparent reason. Did the construction workers forget to finish the job? Had they run out of cement? Or were these places off the map?

Over the following months, as I continued to cycle, closer to houses and front yards than I would normally be, I was struck by the vast number of footpaths that meandered off the sidewalks and disappeared into the tall grass of abandoned lots, to reappear further on, as if

from nowhere. I saw figures walking along them. They appeared silently, magically, as if the green, empty lots had spat them out, carrying backpacks, briefcases and shopping bags in their hands. Everybody was walking with a purpose, going somewhere. I felt as if I had been transported to another time and place – I was no longer in a recognizable city; I was in a strange kind of rural downtown where people crossed fields to get to where they needed to. Deep down some memory stirred, but I could not bring it to the surface.

Later someone told me these paths have an urban planning name: *desire lines*. Images and feelings flashed through me: what a beautiful concept - desire lines: literally and metaphorically, making paths where we want to go. It's not an unusual phenomenon - as pedestrians we frequently make these kinds of paths - shortcuts - mostly over grass, earth, stones - but they tend to be shorter, cutting across those pesky right-angled corners of pavements and they are not often connected to each other across busy main roads. What was so special about Detroit? It took me those autumn months of cycling on Detroit sidewalks to realise that these desire lines reminded me of South Africa. In 1979 I'd spent three months at a convent in Bophuthatswana:[1] early every morning from my window I would see heads suddenly appear over the horizon of the veldt, people emerging apparently from nowhere, walking with great purpose, then disappearing into the grass or another rolling hill. I discovered there was a network of paths leading from the many surrounding huts and villages to the main road where they would catch a ride to work, school, church or to another village. Why had these images sprung to my mind there, in the middle of arguably the "most representative city in America,"[2] the most postmodern city in the post-industrial world? What was the connection to the paths I had seen in South Africa, to the people I had met there?

Detroit was a major US city, home to some of the grandest institutions in the country – the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Charles Wright Museum of African-American History, the General Motors Building, the Guardian Building, the Detroit Opera House, the Fox Theater,[3] yet a city whose streets were not only *not* paved with gold, but were often not paved at all. A city where there were few buses to these grand buildings, where corner shops were few and far between - a city that was only accessible by motor car. And I was walking through a landscape that was more akin to a pre-industrial South African veldt.

"Oh what's going on, Tell me what's going on?"[4]

If the inspiration for my subsequent walking practice and research had a physical site anywhere, it was there and then, standing on the corner of a scrubby vacant lot in the midst of dilapidated and burnt-out buildings, feeling the weight of history and that somehow I was witness to an unfolding of the development and decline of Western industrial capitalism. Oddly dramatic, unsupported, unreferenced, it was only an instinctive feeling… but I knew then that I was going to have to find out what was going on.

Whatever feelings I might have had about the anarchistic potential of this alternative network of human meanderings, my overriding feeling was one of abandonment. Following the desire lines that others had created was leading me to unearth the historical and economic circumstances that had led to their necessity.

Detroit rewound

Early twentieth century Detroit saw the convergence of mass labour, capital, the creation of the assembly line, the development of urban planning and the hegemony of modernist capitalism. Democratisation of work on a mass scale with invention of the automobile and the development of the assembly line, Henry Ford was making the city accessible to

everyone in particular to people who migrated from the southern states of the country to work on the line for the notorious five dollars a day.

Long-term Detroiter and academic Jerry Herron writes that “The city became a destination to begin with because it modelled a particular way of life that people wanted to believe and participate in.”[5] “The city mapped a life based on production, the most obvious expression of which was Henry Ford’s narrative assembly line.”[6] Detroit epitomized the American Dream functioning representationally by “defining a destination, where historical differences – of race, religion, language, national origin – were transformed by work into a ‘modern’ individuality, with its common idiom of expectation and fulfilment: getting a job, buying a house, starting a family, finding a better life.”[7]

Henry Ford is reputed to have made the statement: “History is bunk” and this became a mantra for corporate interests in the Detroit metropolitan area. Paul Virilio argued that the mass production of cars and their ancillary infrastructure would “modify the citizen’s way of life by transforming all the consumer’s needs, by totally remodelling a territory that at the beginning had no more than 400 kilometres of road.”[8] This invention would “cure the masses of their ‘temptation of the streets,’” in other words, demands for better wages and working conditions would be satisfied with material wealth as opposed to any substantial change in the processes of production itself. Herron observes that Ford’s Detroit was all about the “creation of a material plenitude so vast that people would quit worrying about the past, and history would cease to matter.”[9] The car was the perfect vehicle for that: inside you were protected from noticing changes in the weather and in the environment, and you had to keep your eye firmly on what was ahead, the future, ignoring the sidewalks and what was behind you. Virilio’s vision was realised in Detroit with new eight-lane highways radiating like spokes from the central hub of a wheel[10] from downtown Grand Circus enabling the fastest, most efficient route from the factories to the suburbs.

The landscape was sliced and diced with the construction of larger automobile factories and ancillary industrial complexes, fragmenting and obliterating downtown neighbourhoods, separating families from one another. It became increasingly difficult to experience Detroit as a viable city.

Writing in the 1960s Jane Jacobs notes that “researchers hunting the secrets of the social structure in a dull gray-area district of Detroit came to the unexpected conclusion there was no social structure.”[11] There cannot be – the sidewalks are far away from the houses, there are no stores, cafes or bars, distances are too far for people to walk, so there is little chance to stop and chat.

Just as the Haussmanization of Parisian streets did not prevent the uprisings of 1871, in Detroit the connection between “violence and the civic narrative emerged as early as July 1967, when the writing on Woodward was being done by U.S. army tanks, summoned there by the governor of Michigan to help contain the rioting that lasted for eight days and took forty-three lives.”[12]

With the decline of the automobile industry and 1967 riots Detroit was no longer a destination but a place to leave. Investment in the city declined rapidly. The ‘white flight’ into the neighbouring suburbs following the riots and the continuing ‘middle-class flight’ left the inner-city empty of people and infrastructure. 8 Mile Road, the official city limit (made famous by Eminem in the eponymous song and film), became not only the division between city and suburbs, but also the divide between rich and poor, black and white, between them and us, between myself and the Other. Detroit suburbs were some of the richest in the country, and the average inner-city income was approximately a mere 47% of that in the surrounding suburbs. Though there is a movement of ever-growing African-American middle class into the wealthier suburbs[13] many residents of the inner city are still wary of travelling beyond 8 Mile Road, and when driving into the city for the opera or ball game suburbanites would automatically lock their car doors on reaching the 8 Mile border. With the still intact and increasingly modernized freeways suburbanites could ignore the state of the inner city by keeping their eyes firmly on the road.

Houses abandoned by owners moving to the suburbs crumbled through lack of care and maintenance, were squatted, became crack houses, were burnt either for insurance purposes or as a statement, the charred remains becoming grassed over time, forming strange earthen barrows.[14] Detroit and its histories, in the form of materials and people, were abandoned, dumped into piles of trash, littering sidewalks, vacant lots, neighbourhoods, parks, in fact any piece of available land. Histories that could be ignored by anyone passing by at a speed above three miles per hour.[15]

Walking in Detroit was seen as failure, lack of reaching the American dream. And as abnormal – if you’re walking you must be either poor, mentally ill or drunk – or all three…. Walking goes against the flow. Practices or habits that are not within the streamlined grid of knowable and verifiable economic process are seen as out of control or abnormal. Walking is one of those acts, Simon Pope calls a desire line running through former common land in Kennington Park, London "only one of many acts of resistance."[16] Walking desire lines in Detroit - going against the grid – out of rhythm with the streamlined assembly line and fast lane to the suburbs, slower, open to the vagaries of weather and variances in topography, to chance encounters with people and animals.

Elements such as walking counter to the flow of commerce and industry, along paths made through fields and abandoned lots. Paths where you will startle a pheasant into taking off in noisy flight. These are the desire lines that are trodden into the vacant lots by the everyday steps of women, men and children going about the everyday business of getting where they need to go. A clearly visible, yet hidden, trace of human movement and mobility, that is not quantifiable, but one that is implicated with meaning and power, poverty and freedom.

Yet walking those desire lines and treading the paths of others, I felt I was uncovering another city, a city hidden by, and from, its own history. I walked those desire lines regularly from 1999 to 2012, on my own and with others, discovering networks of improvisational spaces and places, people creating, devising, working, playing with no municipal support or infrastructure to support them. Streets in once vibrant Detroit neighbourhoods, that had been amputated at the freeway, were now cul-de-sacs, like ox-bow bends after a river spate – forgotten, stagnant, slow-paced and quiet, potential refuges from the incessant hum of the freeway… places for a spontaneous street party, an improvised car repair shop, a Sunday barbecue after an outdoor church service, a playground around an abandoned motorboat.

What are the stories that are written under my feet, under yours?[17]

The serendipitous combination of being an outsider, foreigner, curious observer and performer meant that I was able to ask obvious and simplistic questions[18] that provoked outpourings of history, personal stories, anecdotes and political views that quickly became material for creating artwork, attempting to make meaning out of a situation that seemed chaotic and confusing.

Our theatre company, Walk & Squawk, began the *Walking Project*, which was to become an interdisciplinary performance, mapping and cultural-exchange project collaboratively developed with U.S. and South Africa-based artists and communities[19] during a series of residencies in Detroit and KwaZulu-Natal from 2003 to 2006.[20] We were creating an artwork out of an everyday cultural practice, a practice that elicited walking stories from everyone we talked to.

In an article,[21] Erika Block wrote about the project:

“Much like the *desire lines* we were investigating, our ideas about the practice and possibilities of performance evolved with the *Walking Project*. We started to ask ourselves how this work operates both off and on stage, how the growing body of research can be applied across disciplines, and how it crosses, or maybe even erases, boundaries between art and everyday life, between people from different places, and across hierarchies of “experts” and “community participants.”

What started off as a bike ride along paths through abandoned housing lots in Detroit led to a series of walks along *desire lines* in neighbourhoods in the city and KwaZulu-Natal, generating conversation, photographs, stories and connections between the two places. We shaped a series of workshops and improvisation sessions around the themes of walking, geography and place. We collected stories from elders, high-school students and the people we took walks within rural areas and urban neighbourhoods. We started to make connections between walking and thinking, evolution and history, class, race and political action."

Erika continued: "These networks of *desire lines* are personal, often intimate maps that tell stories about these shifting communities. They demonstrate differences, but they also illuminate similarities." The *Walking Project* explored these reflections, differences and similarities.

As we moved out of the theatre into a world of site performance, we began to realize that meaning, power and discrimination are sewn into the fabric of urban design and planning. Erika wrote, "These networks of *desire lines* are personal, often intimate maps that tell stories about these shifting communities."[22] We found that everyone we talked to about the *Walking Proje*ct had a walking story, whether it was childhood memories or current peeves with sidewalk maintenance. Investigating this almost universal cultural practice rooted in the habits of the body became the point of departure for interrogating notions of art, social change and political dialogue.

Our work started focusing more on conversations, anecdotes, personal stories from our audiences and the public. Our roles as performers and directors transformed into roles as facilitators, curators, gatherers of snippets of information, material, objects, histories, knitting these threads into a variety of aesthetic shapes - a music CD, a visual art exhibition, a public walk through neighbourhoods in the city, a spoken word performance, a late night performance jam. None of these took precedence over the other and participants came from far beyond the theatre circles that we had previously worked with. Work, everyday life, audiences, participants, performers, performances, walks… the boundaries started to blur, creating welcome uncertainties, openings and portals into new realms of practice - art, geography, urban planning, sculpture, sound, mapping… We were making new meanings and definitions.

With the *Walking Project* in Kwa-Zulu Natal these beginnings developed into deeper walkings and talkings: conversations as we were led through neighbourhoods, locations and rural areas with our company of performers, explored and highlighted deep differences in experiences, privilege, opportunities and histories. At times we felt no longer in control - of the direction of walks and talks, was this ok? Who was leading? Did someone need to be in charge?

We walked with primary school students who showed us completely different ways of walking through and being in their environment, with landmarks that were to be feared or celebrated. With families and friends of the performers we discussed the value and importance of land and property and as we walked through the rural areas. With everyone we discussed walking distances - how far in terms of hours and days, places and events were from one another.

Our practice has learned and taken much from the walking of Kwa-Zulu-Natal and Detroit desire lines, from the cul-de-sacs of spontaneous 'happenings', which themselves mirror ideas and practices carried out by the Situationists in Paris, who were able to *choose* to experience their city differently. We became interested in notions of public space and what is supposed to happen in those spaces. What happens when you don't walk with a purpose, instead you walk to look, to experience the journey? What happens when you improvise and

perform as you walk? What happens when you loiter on street corners, listening and observing?

Walking does not protect us so conveniently from the dumping of history: we are confronted and perhaps forced to engage with this presence of absence. And in reflecting on these remnants of lives and traces of people's pasts, we may make connections to our own pasts, forgotten narratives, ancestors, their and our earlier desire lines.

We started to interrupt the norms of what is expected in public space, in order to continue the conversations that had started on our walks. We loitered on corners, cycled the streets carrying a plush-looking sofa which we then set up to invite passers- by to take a rest and have a chat; we invited people to guide us on neighbourhood walks and later asked people to take part in researching their own everyday walks. We are still performing, but we are performing with others. Just as walking the Detroit desire lines was an attempt to re-stitch the fragmented fabric of inner-city neighbourhoods, so our walking practice continues to be a way to make sense of lives that are separate from one another, to gather common threads and explore deep differences with others, and to experience environments we travel through individually and also together at no more than three miles per hour, carving out new desire lines that others might follow.

Endnotes

[1] Bophutatswana was a so-called 'independent' homeland state, artificially created by the apartheid government of South Africa in 1961. Territorially speaking it was fragmented, large parts scattered in the area north of Pretoria and bordering Botswana, with a tiny area located in the southern part of the Orange Free State, bastion of Afrikaanerdom.
[2] Herron, Jerry (1993) *AfterCulture, Detroit and the humiliation of history* Detroit: Wayne State University Press
[3] The Fox Theater is still the highest grossing legit (meaning mainstream) theatre in the country.
[4] Gaye, Marvin (1971) *What's Going On?* Gaye was dubbed "Prince of Motown." http://www.elyrics.net/read/m/marvin-gaye-lyrics/what_s-going-on-lyrics.html accessed 24 March 2010
[5] Herron, Jerry. *AfterCulture*. (p.123)
[6] Herron, Jerry. *AfterCulture*. (p.123)
[7] Herron, Jerry. *AfterCulture*. (p.119)
[8] Virilio, Paul (1986) *Speed and Politics, an essay on dromology,* translated by Mark Polizotti, USA: Semiotext(e). (p. 26).
[9] Herron, Jerry. *AfterCulture.*
[10] Dunnigan, Brian (2001) *Frontier Metropolis, Picturing Early Detroit, 1701-1838*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press. (p. 23).
[11] Jacobs, Jane (1962) The Death and Life of Great American Cities, London: Jonathan Cape. (p. 68).
[12] Herron, Jerry. *AfterCulture*. (p.118).
[13] Oak Park, West Bloomfield and Farmington Hills, for example.
[14] There has been a huge amount of teardown and clean up since 2014 when Mike Duggan became mayor of Detroit.
[15] Three miles an hour is arguably the average walking speed. Rebecca Solnit reserves a chapter in *wanderlust* to explore the effects on the mind of the average speed of a walk of three miles per hour.
[16] Pope, Simon (2000) London walking: a handbook for survival, UK: ellipsis. (p.70).

[17] quote from Bheki Maphumolo, performer & Morwenna Bosch, assistant director: *First Steps: the Walking Project.*
[18] Such as “Why do people walk across fields in Detroit?” “Why are there no pavements to walk on?” “Why are the sidewalks so broken up and overgrown?”
[19] We had already established a relationship with artists and community groups in KwaZulu-Natal in 1997, when we had been invited by the University of KwaZulu-Natal to create a physical theatre piece with students, who still remained in their ethnic and tribal groups chiefly because of language differences, although apartheid had been officially dismantled.
[20] The *Walking Project* used these *desire lines* as springboard to explore the paths we walk – literally and metaphorically - and to see how these are formed through culture, geography, language, economics and love. It looked at how people make their own paths; how and why people’s paths cross; and how changing patterns of movement can alter perceptions, attitudes and lives. See Volume 2, Part 3.1.
[21] Block, Erika and Ramsden, Hilary (2005) The Walking Project: Desire Lines, Walking and Mapping Across Continents, Leonardo Electronic Almanac, http://leoalmanac.org/gallery/locative/index.asp last accessed 23 August 2007
[22] Block, Erika and Ramsden, Hilary. The Walking Project